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Chapter 2

Party Politics and the Policy Agenda: the Case of the United Kingdom

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Public policy scholars have not paid very much attention to political parties and spatial models of party competition. In the world of agenda setting, bureaucrats and elected officials compete with interest groups and experts to try to get their preferred topic on the agenda (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 2009). Political attention rises and falls in response to these demands and according to the cognitive capacity of core policy-makers. Authoritative decision-making arenas, such as the legislature and the cabinet, provide rules and procedures to ensure that one option is preferred over another.

With such a focus on issues and actors, it is easy to forget that policy-makers are very different from each other. Many key participants not only associate with one sector of activity or policy, but they seek to appeal to wider concerns and constituencies. They may advocate policy positions associated with an ideology—a system of ideas or an outlook aiming to change or preserve the world. Linked to the promotion of an ideology, politicians have an overriding concern with re-election, both to their own districts, but also—in a parliamentary system—as possible

members of a government. Party organizations generally seek to gain power and to implement their own program of policies when in government. Their leaders occupy the highest office and have places at the cabinet table. They can make an array of appointments across public organizations, and the state's bureaucrats have to do their bidding. They use this power to influence policies in a particular direction and to impose some degree of coherence.

Rather than being analyzed in its own right, party color appears only as a control variable in many studies of the policy agenda. But it is reasonable to expect left parties to concentrate on social policy, and for right parties to focus on international affairs and defense, the so-called guns and butter trade-off. The strength of parties in legislatures should, moreover, determine the degree to which it is possible for them to focus on their owned issues. The UK should be a strong case of party dominance because of the way in which centralized and disciplined parties command a majority of seats in the legislature controlling both policy-making and implementation (Norton 2005). An interesting starting point for the study of policy agendas of political parties is to find out whether the party dominance in the UK case translates into distinctive policy outputs.

To assess the importance of political parties for the policy agenda, we use data on executive and legislative agendas in the UK between 1946 and 2008, coded according to the policy content system of the UK Policy Agendas Project (consistent with the coding system for the Comparative Agendas Project). The objective is to analyze the impact of changes of the party in government on issue content. We first

consider the policy content of the Speech from the Throne and Acts of UK Parliament, examining the impact of party control on annual executive and legislative priorities of British government. We are interested in the direction and size of the effects of the partisan control of government for attention to issues such as health, education and defense. We conclude by discussing the extent of the impact of parties on the policy agenda in UK politics and the implications of these findings for the comparative study of policy agendas.

Parties and Policy Agendas

The central proposition of the literature is that political parties pursue distinctive policy agendas. Parties compete on the issue agenda, seeking to establish or maintain a reputation for competence, taking ownership, on some issues more than others (Budge and Farlie 1983; Carmines and Stimson 1993; Petrocik 1996). Further, parties differentiate their policy positions to provide responsible representation of their supporters, sometimes even at the expense of strategic considerations (see Adams 2001). This is partly because they respond to different preferences in the electorate, such as between left and right positions; but also because they are backed by activists and interest groups that articulate an ideology, which they seek to put into practice. It is likely that they will prioritize policy issues that link to their underlying preferences. In addition, the public expects parties to represent a diversity of preferences from which they can choose (Ezrow 2007). This expectation plays into the concerns of the activists, but of course too much distinctiveness could precipitate the

rejection of the party by the voters at the ballot box. Giving priority to an issue suggests that governments will pursue more policy on that issue, while giving the minimum necessary attention to other issues that it does not claim ownership.

The comparative politics literature highlights the impact of parties. Output studies show that parties of the left tend to favor higher expenditure on social items (e.g. Castles 1982). The literature in comparative political economy stresses that left parties can maintain this expenditure even in the context of a globalized international economy (Garrett 1998; Swank 2002). Parties prioritize different aspects of policy, such as left parties preferring less unemployment and right parties less inflation (Hibbs 1977). Evidence from the literature on policy and public opinion is that parties seek to balance defense and welfare expenditure with left parties preferring more social welfare and right parties preferring more defense (see Soroka and Wlezien 2009). The party positions literature shows that parties receive a mandate from elections, which they translate into policy promises and outputs (McDonald and Budge 2005).

Nonetheless, there are factors that reduce the influence of political parties on public policy: the electoral competition for the median voter, responsiveness to public opinion, the influence of interest groups and media pressures. Moreover, there is pressure for policy stability when a party enters government (Rose and Davies 1994). Typically its elite becomes more separated from the party membership, charged as they are with governing the country, and where they do business with non-partisan individuals and groups, such as bureaucrats and experts. Party effects

are not expected to be strong across all areas, especially where policy-making relates to valence issues (Stokes 1963), on which there is broad consensus over objectives. To obtain maximum advantage from 'selective emphasis' or issue ownership (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996), parties need to emphasize those issues that benefit them, and respond to the concerns of their activists, but not depart too far from prioritizing policies that are important for the country and maintaining a reputation for competence and good governance. Moreover, comparative analysis assumes that political parties pursue multiple objectives as vote seekers, office seekers and policy-seekers (Strøm and Muller 1999). The balancing of these objectives takes place within particular national institutional structures that mediate these party effects (Schmidt 1996). It is to the very particular institutional context of the UK that we now turn.

The UK case

The UK is a party dominated political system. Rose sums up the conventional wisdom: 'party, not Parliament, determines control of British government.' (1983, 282). The first-past-the-post (single-member plurality) electoral system usually creates a majority of seats for one party after a general election. With a secure majority—and a centralized party with good discipline over its members in Parliament—the government has a near monopoly over policy-making for an electoral term of up to five years because there are no veto players in the second unelected chamber or at the regional level. The electoral system also benefits one main opposition party and penalizes challengers. With the party in opposition

preparing to take on this governing role should the incumbent lose the next election, this strong form of party government is sustained over time.

The traditional framework of British politics has become more complex in recent years, which might appear to reduce the autonomy of the executive and the party in government. These changes include increasing numbers of rebellions by MPs against their party whips (Cowley 2005); the growing assertiveness of members of the House of Lords (Russell and Scaria 2007); greater regional autonomy from the devolution of power to governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; the ceding of decision-making to the European Union since the mid-1980s; and the growing power of the higher courts since the passing of the Human Rights Act 1998, reinforced by the creation of the Supreme Court in 2009. Moreover, the first-past-the-post system no longer so clearly facilitates the electoral dominance of single party majority government with a less clear relationship between votes and seats (Curtice 2010). There is also greater electoral support for parties outside the duopoly of Labour and the Conservatives, in particular at the subnational level, where proportional representation systems are in operation. Nonetheless, the two main parties survive as the key electoral machines for national and local level elections; they win the most seats; and usually obtain a working majority in the House of Commons. The governing party is able to enact most of its program through parliament (Bevan et al. 2011) and implement its manifesto pledges (Hofferbert et al 1995; Bara 2005), having access to ministerial and prerogative powers like their predecessors. Nor does party control of policy alter much when a coalition is elected

into office as happened in May 2010, when the Conservative Party and Liberal Democrats formed a new government. In a coalition, the leading parties allocate the portfolios between them, agree a joint policy agenda reconciling their election platforms and then control the policy process to implement that agenda. A coalition government therefore implements the parties' manifestos, if in moderated form. Nevertheless, it is to be expected that if coalitions become the norm in British politics, parties will trade in their policy preferences on some issues in return for securing ministerial portfolios or policy concessions on other issues. This can weaken the relationship between one party's ideology and the priorities of the policy agenda it pursues when a member of a government (Müller and Strøm 2000).

Moreover, even if the UK is a perfect example of a party-dominated system, we need not always expect partisan-influenced policy outputs, as there are constraints that prevent parties from pursuing their preferences. Parties can be sensitive to the size of their majority in parliament, either enabling radical programs or forcing governments to steer towards the center and risk succumbing to paralysis. Some studies suggest that these pressures are so strong that party control does not make a difference to policy outputs in the UK (Rose 1980, Rose and Davies 1993). It may be the case that the very dominance of parties in the UK system means they are subject to more pressures than in a multi-party system. Factors that push them together are party competition, media pressure, the need to be credible as a governing party, powerful producer groups and the influence of a centralized bureaucracy. The movement of parties away from their ideological base is a feature of the history of

British politics, such as the Labour Party's move to the center in 1990s under a reformist leadership and modernizing agenda. Party leaders created a rhetorical commitment of deference to markets and adaption to a globalized economy to justify a shift of policy toward the center (Hindmoor 2004).

In spite of these pressures, we still expect parties in the UK to seek to establish or maintain ownership of certain parts of the policy agenda, paying more attention to issues that benefit them and paying less to those that do not. However, there may be issues that parties attend to because they are important and in the national interest or because there is no partisan interest or advantage, perhaps because of the technical and non-public nature of decision-making in a particular domain. We do not expect party control to impact attention across all parts of the policy agenda.

Data and methods

To analyze the impact of party control of government on the policy content of executive and legislative agendas in the UK, we use data from the UK Policy Agendas Project (www.policyagendas.org.uk) for the period from 1946 to 2008 and for nineteen major topic codes that encompass the domains of public policy that UK government deals with (see Appendix 1).¹ The analyses therefore cover the period of policy-making since the Second World War, during which time the party system was

¹ The UK major topics deviate only slightly from the US ones. Colonial and Territorial issues have been added to topic 21 and immigration has been moved from major topic 5 to major topic 2.

relatively stable yielding extended periods of control by the right Conservative party, and the left Labour party.

The chapter uses two measures of the policy agenda of UK government that reflect different stages of the policy process and which the governing party has extensive control over. The first is the Speech from the Throne—also known as the Gracious Speech and the King's or the Queen's Speech—which is an integral feature of the State Opening of Parliament when the sovereign addresses the chamber of the House of Lords with members of the House of Commons watching from the galleries. Since 1901, the Speech from the Throne has been a permanent fixture of the political calendar in Westminster, occurring at the start of the parliamentary session.² The speech highlights matters of importance to the government and details the legislative program that government intends to enact in the forthcoming year. By highlighting certain issues and ignoring others, this provides an annual platform for government to shape the national agenda (Jennings et al. 2011).

The unification of executive and legislative powers in the British political system, combined with its longstanding tradition of party discipline suggests that there should be a close link between executive and legislative agendas and the other outputs of government. Empirical evidence shows a strong relationship between

². Until 1928, the start of a new parliamentary session generally occurred early in the year, January or February. Since then, the parliamentary year has begun in October or November except after an election, where the first act of business for an incoming government is the opening of parliament with a Speech from the Throne.

manifesto pledges, legislative proposals of governing parties and actual policy outputs (Hofferbert and Budge 1992; Bara 2005; Bevan et al. 2011). The speech has been used as a measure of policy-making (e.g. Namenwirth and Weber 1987; Bara 2005; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2005; Jennings and John 2009; Jennings et al. 2011; John and Jennings 2010), as well as in comparison with similar annual executive speeches delivered by the head of state or head of government in a number of countries across Western Europe and in the U.S. (e.g. Breeman et al. 2009; Jennings et al. 2011; Mortensen et al. 2011). This statement of the government's agenda is a key part of the agenda-setting process in British politics. Analysis of its policy content provides a means for assessing the institutional function of the speech as a signal of executive priorities and legislative proposals.

The second institutional venue is Acts of UK Parliament. An Act of Parliament is the name for primary legislation enacted by the UK Parliament. These come into effect after royal assent. The passage of legislation is dependent upon first, second and third readings of the bill. Most bills that are introduced into parliament by the government are passed (there is no vote on the first reading, and votes on the second and third reading are—typically—on party lines, although with exceptions). In practice, the third vote is the only vote that counts as first and second readings and committee stages are procedural. The number of bills that are rejected by the House of Commons is low. The 1911 and 1949 Parliament Acts enable the House of Commons to override votes of the House of Lords in the next legislative session (so the Lords act as a weak check on the lower house).

The full transcripts of the Speech from the Throne were blind coded by two researchers first to break them into 'quasi-sentences' (Volkens 2002), demarcated by a policy idea or statement as well as punctuation, and to determine whether each quasi-sentence contained any policy content. The quasi-sentences were then assigned a major topic code and sub-topic code. This procedure led to 90 per cent inter-coder agreement for most years. The coders resolved remaining differences through discussion and the project leaders made the final decision in the few cases where coders could not agree (see Jennings et al 2011).

The short and long titles of Acts of the UK Parliament were blind-coded by two researchers; assigning a major topic code and subtopic code to each Act. This procedure led to eighty-five percent inter-coder reliability at the major topic level. The remaining differences were resolved through discussion by the project leaders. For each act the date of royal assent of Acts of the UK is the observed time point, and since all acts receive assent prior to the start of a new parliamentary session, which is marked by the Speech from the Throne, we are certain that all Acts are properly attributed to the correct parliamentary year and, subsequently, the correct Speech from the Throne.

To test the effect of party control of government on the content of each of these policy agendas, we estimate a time series regression for each of the nineteen policy topics, for the period from 1946 to 2008, with speeches or laws as the dependent variable. In this 'autoregressive distributed lag' (ADL) model the lagged value of the dependent variable controls for the autoregressive nature of the agenda over time.

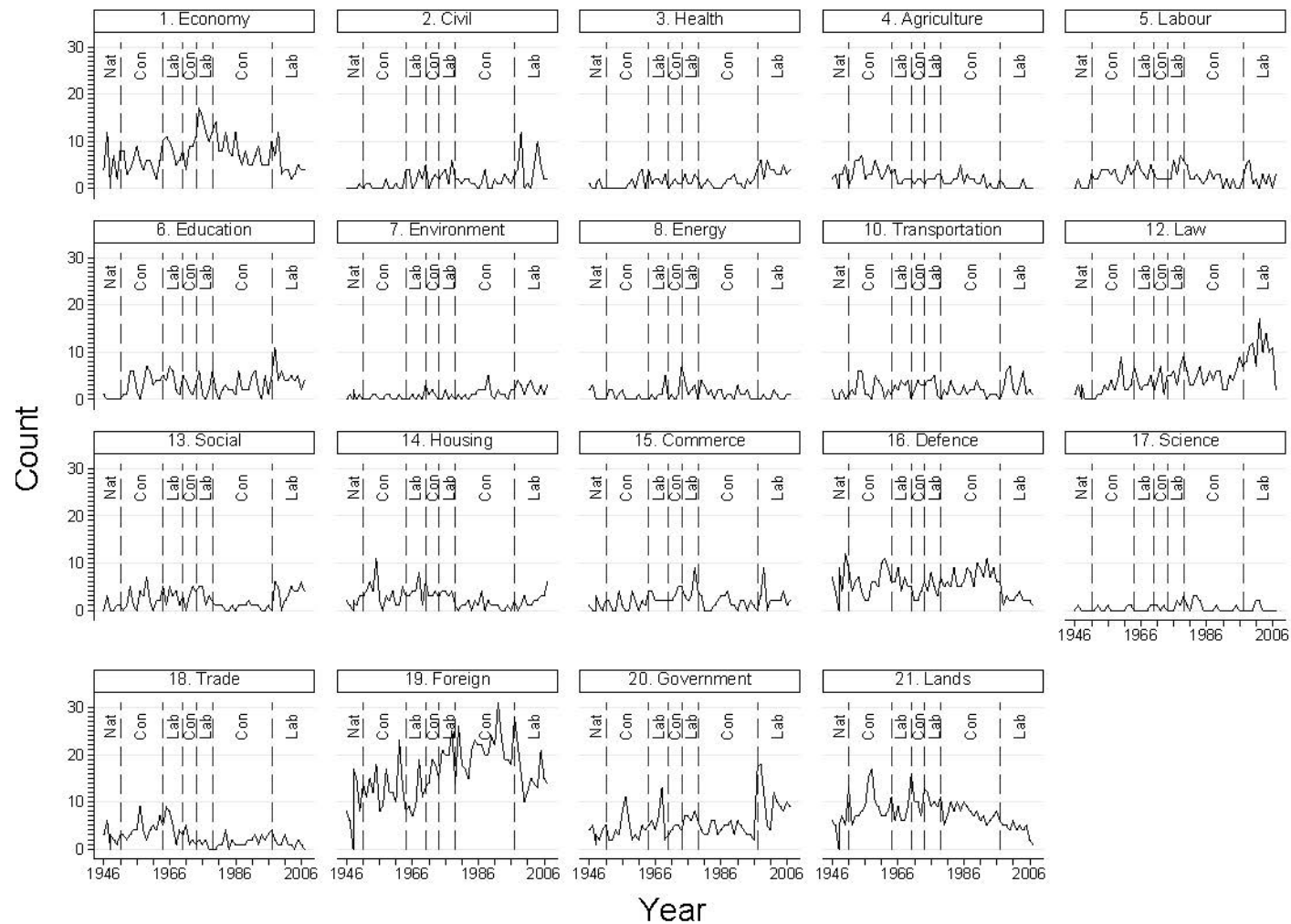
We test for the effect of party control with a variable that is coded 1 when there is a Conservative government and 0 when there is a Labour government. We also include a variable to control for the short session of parliament in 1948, which concerned passage of the third Parliament Act to resolve the gridlock between the House of Lords and the House of Commons. In addition, we control for the effect of time to capture long-run changes (i.e. trends) in attention to large issues in our dataset, in particular the decline of agriculture, defense and international affairs as core topics for the executive.

Analysis

Figures 2.1 and 2.2 report the frequencies of issue attention for speeches and acts by issue. These figures allow us to observe attention to each issue on the agenda and when it changes. The unit of analysis here is the quasi-sentence for speeches and the long-title of the legislation for acts. The vertical lines indicate changes in party control of government, of which there are just six during this period, because of several extended periods in office by a single party (the Conservative Party from 1951 to 1964 and 1979 to 1992 and Labour from 1997 to 2010). As in previous studies (John and Jennings 2010; Jennings et al. 2011), we observe that the length of the speech remains relatively constant after rising just after the Second World War. The number of acts has declined since the mid 1970s (also see John et al. 2013). Figures 2.1 and 2.2 do not appear to indicate large changes at the point when a new party enters office with no dramatic shifts in attention to certain issues following party

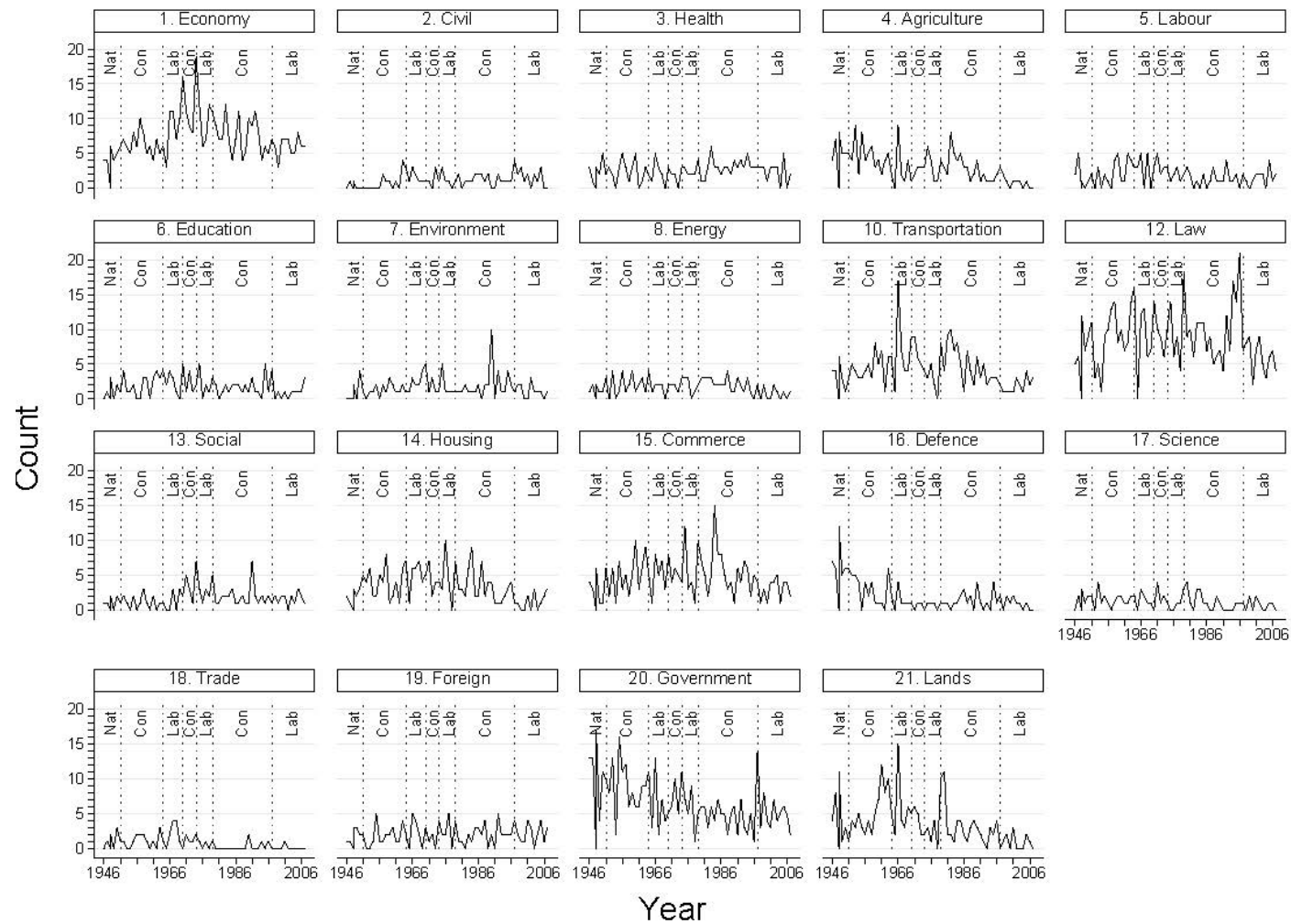
transitions. These observations suggest that following a transition in party control the basic structure of the policy agenda remains stable, responding to long-run forces, such as the gradual weakening of the impact of the economy and foreign affairs on the agenda, the decline of older policy concerns and the rise of new issues (see John and Jennings 2010). The growth in attention to social policies, such as education and health, appears to be a feature of Labour governments after 1997 as represented in speeches.

Figure 2.1. Speeches from the Throne, 1946-2008



Note: The vertical dashed lines indicate changes in party control of Parliament.

Figure 2.2. Acts of Parliament, 1946-2008



Note: The vertical dashed lines indicate changes in party control of Parliament

The use of time series regression analysis enables us to analyze the impact of parties on the issue content of the policy agenda, which tests for party influence while controlling for other factors. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 2.2 for speeches and Table 2.3 for laws. For speeches, six out of nineteen topics show the effect of parties to be statistically significant (one topic is significant at the 90% confidence level, the rest at the 95% level). Overall, the effect size ranges from .8 (for banking and domestic commerce) to 2.6 quasi-sentences (for government operations). The direction of effect indicates that the Conservative party attends more to international affairs, while Labour tends to emphasize health, law, crime and family issues, social welfare, banking and domestic commerce and government operations. In general, the findings for the speeches are consistent with the issue ownership model and traditional party images/reputations—the Conservative Party emphasizes foreign affairs whereas Labour focuses on social issues, which confirms findings from earlier research on the effect of public opinion on the Queen’s Speech for the period from 1960 to 2001 (Jennings and John 2010: 848), and is consistent with conventional wisdom. The valence issue of the economy shows no party difference as expected.

Table 2.1. UK Policy Agendas Project major topic codes

1. Macroeconomics
2. Civil Rights, Minority Issues, Immigration, and Civil Liberties
3. Health
4. Agriculture
5. Labour and Employment
6. Education and Culture
7. Environment
8. Energy
10. Transportation
12. Law, Crime, and Family Issues
13. Social Welfare
14. Community Development, Planning and Housing Issues
15. Banking, Finance, and Domestic Commerce
16. Defence
17. Space, Science, Technology and Communications
18. Foreign Trade
19. International Affairs and Foreign Aid
20. Government Operations
21. Public Lands, Water Management, Colonial and Territorial Issues

See www.policyagendas.org.uk for the full codebook with sub-topic categories and topic descriptions.

Table 2.2: The Speech from the Throne, Dynamic and Party Effects, 1946-2008, by Major Topic

	1, Economy	2, Civil	3, Health	4, Agri	5, Labour	6, Educ	7, Envi	8, Energy	10, Trans	12, Law
L.Speech	0.521*** (0.110)	0.011 (0.129)	-0.010 (0.124)	0.119 (0.124)	0.380** (0.117)	0.263* (0.128)	0.007 (0.134)	0.217† (0.129)	0.214 (0.131)	0.112 (0.141)
Time	-0.024 (0.022)	0.045** (0.016)	0.042*** (0.010)	-0.055*** (0.011)	-0.012 (0.012)	0.024 (0.017)	0.033*** (0.009)	-0.003 (0.010)	0.002 (0.013)	0.109*** (0.028)
Conservative	-0.591 (0.780)	-1.457 (0.556)	-1.408*** (0.336)	0.372 (0.351)	-0.503 (0.429)	-0.220 (0.593)	-0.206 (0.272)	-0.426 (0.372)	-0.428 (0.471)	-1.494* (0.709)
Short	-10.871*** (3.168)	-1.380 (2.157)	-1.274 (1.236)	-3.646** (1.350)	-3.063† (1.702)	-1.785 (2.377)	-0.275 (1.089)	-1.865 (1.507)	-1.980 (1.876)	-2.330 (2.715)
Constant	5.577** (1.8330)	-0.427 (1.192)	-0.401 (0.679)	5.491*** (0.986)	2.792** (0.982)	0.839 (1.302)	-1.053† (0.618)	1.354 (0.819)	1.908† (1.060)	-2.363 (1.600)
Adj. R ²	0.294	0.216	0.455	0.438	0.151	0.102	0.235	0.007	0.032	0.481
	13, Social	14, House	15, Commer	16, Defence	17, Science	18, Trade	19, Inter	20, Gov't	21, Lands	
L.Speech	0.221† (0.127)	0.137 (0.135)	0.156 (0.128)	0.285* (0.123)	0.361** (0.126)	0.422*** (0.116)	0.218† (0.127)	0.263* (0.122)	0.352** (0.116)	
Time	0.001 (0.013)	-0.034* (0.016)	0.006 (0.014)	-0.027 (0.019)	0.001 (0.006)	-0.039** (0.014)	0.117** (0.042)	0.047* (0.022)	-0.048* (0.019)	
Conservative	-1.202* (0.503)	-0.647 (0.526)	-0.830† (0.493)	1.092 (0.687)	0.158 (0.210)	-0.023 (0.456)	2.660* (1.322)	-2.257** (0.787)	1.138 (0.706)	
Short	-3.048 (1.878)	-3.697† (2.111)	-2.080 (1.960)	-5.332* (2.629)	-0.546 (0.829)	-5.238** (1.812)	-9.186† (4.921)	-4.448 (2.938)	-7.572** (2.685)	
Constant	2.331* (1.071)	4.930*** (1.379)	1.855† (1.089)	5.268** (1.634)	0.125 (0.452)	4.258*** (1.223)	3.215 (2.703)	2.257 (1.630)	7.719*** (1.828)	
Adj. R ²	0.159	0.104	0.049	0.217	0.100	0.351	0.371	0.357	0.375	

Note: N=62, * p ≤ .05, ** p ≤ .01, *** p ≤ .001, † p ≤ 0.10

The exception to the issue ownership model is crime, which is commonly viewed as a Conservative-owned issue, but here the effect is negative and significant indicating that it received more attention from Labour governments. The reverse argument is that a government might want to be seen to be attending to issues where it does not have issue ownership to reassure the public, which has been called 'issue trespass' (Norpoth and Buchanan 1992; also see Damore 2004). An alternative explanation is that it was New Labour, under the leadership of Tony Blair, which focused on crime, both as a means of undermining the Conservative government (see Farrall and Jennings 2011), but also to signal that Labour had become moderate after its shift to the left during the early 1980s. Before becoming leader of the Labour Party, Blair was opposition spokesman on home affairs and famously used the slogan, 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime', which subsequently appeared in the 1997 manifesto, and became a symbol for a more populist Labour Party. If the regression is re-estimated including a variable controlling for the period after 1997, this variable has a significant effect on attention to the issue of crime and renders the party effect statistically insignificant.

Table 2.3: Acts of Parliament, Dynamic and Party Effects, 1946-2008, by Major Topic

	1, Economy	2, Civil	3, Health	4, Agri	5, Labour	6, Educ	7, Envi	8, Energy	10, Trans	12, Law
L.Acts	0.347** (0.121)	0.001 (0.143)	-0.153 (0.129)	-0.186 (0.123)	-0.060 (0.134)	-0.190 (0.127)	-0.123 (0.133)	-0.230† (0.126)	0.100 (0.126)	0.031 (0.125)
Time	-0.005 (0.022)	0.013 (0.008)	0.010 (0.010)	-0.092*** (0.016)	-0.017 (0.012)	-0.014 (0.011)	0.005 (0.012)	-0.015† (0.008)	-0.032 (0.021)	-0.009 (0.030)
Conservative	-0.169 (0.781)	-0.344 (0.297)	0.418 (0.375)	0.480 (0.486)	-0.153 (0.410)	0.195 (0.373)	0.360 (0.442)	0.718* (0.303)	1.330† (0.749)	1.935† (1.089)
Short	-6.537* (3.070)	-0.996 (1.106)	-2.260 (1.486)	-4.881* (1.937)	-2.310 (1.673)	-2.224 (1.489)	-1.548 (1.738)	-1.723 (1.162)	-4.496 (2.947)	-7.839† (4.328)
Constant	5.359** (1.797)	0.487 (0.612)	2.018* (0.840)	9.877*** (1.380)	3.288*** (0.963)	2.963*** (0.866)	1.363 (0.957)	2.775 (0.678)	5.376 (1.770)	8.004** (2.558)
Adj. R ²	0.150	0.037	0.031	0.397	-0.004	0.024	-0.028	0.135	0.102	0.064
	13, Social	14, House	15, Commer	16, Defence	17, Science	18, Trade	19, Inter	20, Gov't	21, Lands	
L.Acts	-0.057 (0.133)	0.045 (0.128)	-0.065 (0.126)	0.041 (0.127)	-0.096 (0.127)	0.127 (0.126)	-0.282* (0.127)	-0.470*** (0.106)	0.081 (0.128)	
Time	0.013 (0.011)	-0.037* (0.018)	-0.004 (0.021)	-0.067*** (0.016)	-0.022** (0.008)	-0.025*** (0.007)	0.006 (0.011)	-0.159*** (0.023)	-0.078** (0.024)	
Conservative	0.139 (0.394)	0.642 (0.610)	1.756* (0.746)	-0.483 (0.506)	0.157 (0.282)	-0.351 (0.244)	-0.582 (0.381)	-1.714* (0.744)	0.573 (0.784)	
Short	-1.315 (1.559)	-4.006 (2.463)	-3.940 (2.948)	-4.368* (2.010)	-1.717 (1.124)	-1.743† (0.957)	-2.479 (1.499)	-9.293** (2.955)	-5.987† (3.140)	
Constant	0.837 (0.858)	5.455*** (1.524)	4.289* (1.699)	6.803*** (1.403)	2.781*** (0.667)	2.621*** (0.622)	2.513** (0.856)	21.759*** (2.181)	8.476*** (1.997)	
Adj. R ²	-0.020	0.085	0.072	0.262	0.084	0.212	0.071	0.461	0.193	

Note: N=62, * p ≤ .05, ** p ≤ .01, *** p ≤ .001, † p ≤ 0.1

We would expect a similar pattern of issue emphasis for Acts of UK Parliament because even though speeches and acts are distinct venues for decision-making, they are closely related parts of the policy process. This is because governments use the speech to set the legislative agenda for the following year (see Bevan et al. 2011). However, acts are different: they are less designed for public consumption and agenda-setting and are sometimes passed because of necessity to respond to external factors or arise because of internal bureaucratic demands, which might be less popular. The results reported in Table 2.3 indicate the impact of party control of government on acts for each policy topic, and show that parties are again important, being statistically significant in five out of the nineteen topics (two of which are significant at the 90% level). The Conservative Party tends to pass more legislative outputs on energy, crime, transport and banking and domestic commerce, while Labour prefers to legislate more on government operations. The effect sizes for the significant coefficients range from .7 (for energy) of an act to nearly 2 for acts (for law and crime). For legislative outputs, then, there is little evidence in support of the issue ownership model as it is not clear that either of the parties emphasize these particular topics, nor is there a difference in legislative attention to the core social policy sectors such as education and health or to defense and foreign affairs. This is surprising given the party differences found in the issue content of the speech, and in light of the evidence of a substantial rate of transmission from the speech to acts. There is no difference between the parties in attention to the economy as expected. The results also indicate that there is a sign reversal between the two venues for the

issues of crime and banking and domestic commerce, with the Conservative Party legislating more on these issues, but talking less about them. We would not expect a large party difference in legislation concerning international relations because most government action in this policy domain is conducted through executive decisions rather than legislation, with the exception of international treaties that require House of Commons approval.

Conclusion

Parties matter in British politics, but there may be good reason to think that parties do not matter for the policy agenda as much as classic accounts of party government would lead us to believe. Only about a third of the issue domains identified by the Policy Agendas Project coding system are significantly different under Labour than under the Conservatives, both for the Speech from the Throne and for Acts of UK Parliament. For the remainder of the topics, other factors, such as public opinion, events, external changes and the work of pressure groups, make their impact on public policy, consistent with the metaphor of issue intrusion where new issues are able to access the governing agenda irrespective of the partisan cycle (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Here the dynamics of political attention also make their impact where issues rise up the policy agenda beyond the control of party leaders. More fine-grained analysis using variables that attend to each policy sector, perhaps using case study methods, could show how issue attention adjusts in response to emergence of these problems. Moreover, earlier work on the issue diversity of the

policy agenda shows that party control of government is not a significant factor in determining the overall structure or focus of the policy agenda (John and Jennings 2010).

Party change through elections result in an inflow of new decision-makers and new ideas inside government, but there are also pressures to retain a stable level of attention to policy issues once competition for space and time on the parliamentary timetable comes into focus. Parties also compete to ensure that the issues that are on the public's mind are on their agenda too, making the electoral changing of the guard less important than it might be. Parties are still important however, and the issue ownership model is plausible for speeches if not so much for laws. There are some exceptions even here, and we have noted the manner in which Labour paid attention to the issue of crime as a means for establishing its credibility, especially during its reinvention as 'New Labour' in the 1990s.

The main finding of this chapter is that talking is not the same as doing: party effects differ in executive speeches of policy priorities compared with legislative outputs. Political parties differ in their attention to a number of traditional issue strengths in statements of executive priorities, but do not exhibit such a discernible pattern of issue emphasis with respect to law making. This is not entirely surprising because speeches are designed for public consumption, and are intended to portray the policy agenda of the governing party in a positive light. Laws are often passed because of regulatory requirements, such as in response to European Union directives. Nevertheless, this finding is unexpected because of the close relationship

between speeches and laws (Bevan et al. 2011). Whereas the level of attention to policy issues in speeches tends to translate into laws, the partisan aspect of this agenda does not. That is a strong finding. Not only is there a general lack of correspondence between what is important for parties in speeches and what is important in laws, there are sign reversals for the effects of party for crime and banking and domestic commerce. For reasons that are not entirely clear, in office, Labour likes to talk more about crime and legislate less on it, while the Conservative Party does the opposite. This finding suggests parties use these venues for different purposes when in government.

Parties matter, but not for all issues; nor do they impact in the same way across institutional arenas. For a party-dominated system, like the UK, there are pressures for the two main parties to maintain their attention to many policy issues, while establishing or maintaining ownership of some issues to distinguish them from their opponents. The results do not deliver a convincing victory for the politics matters debate, but at the same time we do not find that party effects disappear. Whether such a pattern extends outside the UK case is a matter for further research and debate. If parties matter less because of the compromises of coalition politics, then we might expect less party differences in other contexts. Research on executive speeches for Denmark and the Netherlands finds no effect of party control of government on the policy agenda of the speeches, and only a marginal impact for the UK (Mortensen et al. 2010). If coalition politics becomes a regular fixture in the UK, maybe the already modest party effects that we observe here will decline.

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